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(CHINA PRISONER)

WASHINGTON (UPI) -- PRESIDENT NIXON WEDNESDAY PUBLICLY IDENTIFIED THE ONLY CIVILIAN AMERICAN KNOWN TO BE IN A CHINESE PRISON AS AN AGENT OF THE CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY.

NIXON SAID HE HAD RAISED THE CASE OF JOHN T. DOWNEY WITH CHINESE PREMIER CHOU EN-LAI IN THEIR PEKING TALKS LAST YEAR, EXPRESSING HOPE FOR HIS RELEASE.

DOWNEY AND RICHARD G. FECTEAU WERE CAPTURED BY THE CHINESE WHEN THEIR AIRCRAFT WAS FORCED DOWN ON CHINESE TERRITORY IN 1952, DURING THE KOREAN WAR.

THEY WERE OFFICIALLY IDENTIFIED AT THE TIME AS CIVILIAN EMPLOYEES OF THE U.S. ARMY. IT BECAME WIDELY KNOWN IN THE INTERVENING YEARS THAT THEY WERE CIA AGENTS AND NIXON CONFIRMED DOWNEY'S ROLE ON WEDNESDAY.

DURING QUESTIONING AT A NEWS CONFERENCE, NIXON SAID THE DOWNEY CASE "INVOLVES A CIA AGENT."

FECTEAU WAS RELEASED IN DECEMBER, 1971, AFTER 19 YEARS IMPRISONMENT. DOWNEY WAS SENTENCED TO 30 YEARS BUT THE PRESIDENT NOTED THAT HIS SENTENCE WAS COMMUTED TO FIVE YEARS, AS THE CHINESE ANNOUNCED IN 1971.

"WE HAVE NO ASSURANCE THAT ANY CHANGE OF ACTION, OTHER THAN THE COMMUTATION OF SENTENCE, WILL TAKE PLACE," NIXON SAID, BUT SAID THIS COUNTRY HAD LET THE CHINESE KNOW THROUGH PRIVATE CHANNELS IT WOULD WELCOME DOWNEY'S RELEASE.

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